

VZCZCXRO3707
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHGO #0602/01 1240849
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 040849Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4503
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0836
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9612
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4126
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1586
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0103
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3306
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6707
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4321
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0715
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0716
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0361
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2649
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0294
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000602

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [MASS](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR: "WE SEEK CLOSER TIES TO BURMA"

REF: A. STATE 66877

[1](#)B. MOSCOW 3859

[1](#)C. 05 RANGOON 1128

RANGOON 00000602 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Russian Ambassador, a four-year veteran in Rangoon, described Russia and Burma as at the "beginning of a new stage in bilateral cooperation." The two countries recently exchanged senior level visitors "to reinvigorate relations." The Ambassador described sanctions as counterproductive and expressed strong opposition to any interference in Burma's domestic affairs. He sharply criticized the democratic opposition and expressed empathy with the Burmese regime's defense of military rule as "necessary to avoid the disintegration of the Union." He admitted, however, that Russians have minimal interest in Burma and even less knowledge about the country. Although we have seen recent progress in moving many countries toward agreement on common objectives in Burma, it would appear we still have our work cut out in bringing Russia along. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On May 2, Charge, joined by P/E Chief, called on Russian Federation Ambassador to Burma, Oleg Kabanov, to discuss recent exchanges of visits between Moscow and Rangoon. Kabanov, who has been in Burma since 2002 and is poised to become the new dean of the diplomatic corps, follows Burma policy developments closely and assiduously reads Congressional testimony and statements by U.S. policy makers. He engaged the Charge in a wide-ranging, and at times passionate, exchange of views that lasted over two hours.

ROAD TRIP: MAUNG AYE AND 50 OF HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS

¶3. (C) Amb. Kabanov, who participated in SPDC Deputy Chairman Maung Aye's April 2-6 mission to Russia, echoed many of the themes addressed by the Russian MFA in describing the trip and Russia's Burma policy objectives (ref B). He said that Vice Senior General Maung Aye took a sizable delegation of over 50 members with him. Among the unusually large number of senior officials who participated were four of the junta's twelve generals, including Secretary-1 Lt Gen Thein Sein; six cabinet ministers; and the Navy and Air Force chiefs.

¶4. (C) While in Moscow, according to Kabanov, Maung Aye explained to his hosts the history of post-independence Burma, outlined the reasons the military seized power in 1988, and described the regime's social and economic achievements to date. Kabanov said that Maung Aye gave a "compelling" defense of military rule, stating that the regime had a credible need to maintain Burma's territorial integrity, deter violence, and keep the country from collapse.

¶5. (C) Kabanov said that Russian Prime Minister Fradkov had wished Maung Aye "every success" and expressed Russian satisfaction with bilateral cooperation and with shared positions on a range of international issues at the U.N., including disarmament and the non-militarization of space. Maung Aye, said Kabanov, talked about the SPDC's road map process in very general terms, but made no mention of either Aung San Suu Kyi or the National League for Democracy (NLD). The Russians did not raise these issues, either, admitted Kabanov.

BURMA'S NATURAL CHOICE

¶6. (C) Kabanov described Russia and Burma as being at the "beginning of a new stage in bilateral cooperation." To this end, he said the Maung Aye visit was designed "to

RANGOON 00000602 002.2 OF 004

reinvigorate relations and to reintroduce Burma to Russia." He described the highs and lows of the Russian-Burmese relationship over recent decades, noting that during 1950s Nikita Krushchev had visited Burma twice and that the USSR had built the first international hotel in Rangoon. Interest waned in Burma as the Soviet Union began its own transformation.

¶7. (C) Kabanov said that Burmese interest in Russia stems from the regime's desire to "break out of its cocoon" in the region and improve relations elsewhere to counter pressure from the West. For this reason, he continued, the GOB treated the Maung Aye visit as "historic" and a source of momentum for the bilateral relationship. Russia is a "natural choice" as a non-regional partner because, Kabanov said, "we are non-aggressive." He added that the SPDC generals realize that Burma is falling behind and want to tap their rich natural and human resources in exchange for Russian technology.

¶8. (C) The Charge asked about the benefits to Russia of closer ties with Burma. Kabanov admitted that the Russian Government "doesn't have too much interest in Burma." Various bilateral economic and commercial MOUs, he said, were "premature" since the "investment climate is not so good." The Russian business sector, he added, "doesn't know anything about the Burmese market." The Burmese promised seafood, fruit, and rubber exports to Russia. Kabanov indicated that distance worked against these exports, although the prospects for seafood are promising. The GOB, he added, had expressed some interest in Russian technology for hydropower development and gas and oil drilling.

RUSSIAN WEEK IN RANGOON

¶9. (C) Kabanov demurred on providing any details about the April 25-27 visit to Burma of Army Deputy Chief of Staff Moltenskoii Vladimir, who met with Maung Aye and other senior SPDC generals. He simply described the trip as "reciprocal."

During the same week, President of the Russian Supreme Court Vyacheslav Lebedev also visited. Kabanov said the latter visit was a pre-planned trip to Burma and Cambodia to "exchange views on legal systems," and was unrelated to either Maung Aye's trip or to the Russian military visit. During the Chief Justice's visit, the Russians heard that the GOB plans to reconvene the National Convention "at the end of the year." Kabanov said that the next session "will by no means be the last one."

NUKES, ARMS, AND NORTH KOREA

¶10. (C) The Charge raised nuclear cooperation between Burma and Russia. Kabanov said that a preliminary 2001 agreement for a Russian-built nuclear research reactor in Burma remained on the back burner. During his visit to Moscow, Maung Aye reiterated Burma's interest in nuclear cooperation, aimed at producing isotopes for medical research purposes. Kabanov noted, however, that the Burmese were unlikely to pursue the agreement any further this year, or perhaps even for the next few years. He insisted that Russia would ensure that IAEA supervision, protocols, and standards apply--if the project moves forward. He acknowledged that Burmese were studying nuclear issues in Russia, but added they were also studying other unspecified subjects.

¶11. (C) Kabanov dismissed concerns about the SPDC's renewed ties with North Korea and the potential for a nuclear relationship with the DPRK. "I don't buy the rumors," said Kabanov, "the GOB is not stupid enough to pursue nuclear arms from the North Koreans -- it would be a sign of incredible desperation." The Charge observed that the relocation of the

RANGOON 00000602 003.2 OF 004

capital to remote Pyinmana was a sign of desperation, to which Kabanov responded with a lengthy recounting of official GOB explanations for the move. The Charge noted that regardless of the motives, no one should assume that the regime was rational in its decision making.

¶12. (C) The Charge, referring to Maung Aye's visit to Russia, asked Kabanov if the GOB purchased arms from Russia. Kabanov deflected the question and responded, "The regime gets weapons from many sources; they don't make big purchases in any case." He acknowledged that the Russian state-owned arms dealer Rosoboronexport had opened an office in Rangoon in 2005 (ref C), but quickly changed the subject.

A HEATED EXCHANGE

¶13. (C) Kabanov grew passionate, and at times heated, in discussing the situation inside Burma and various efforts by the international community to seek reform. "It is fruitless to try and change the generals," he stated, "they are patriots and they firmly believe what they are doing is for the good of the country." He said that ASEAN had made "a big mistake" in sending Malaysian FM Hamid to Rangoon. "Good neighbors don't interfere," Kabanov said, "and ASEAN is only making it worse."

¶14. (C) Kabanov insisted that the Burmese generals were not interested in pursuing personal wealth. He sharply criticized "western" sanctions, which he described as "useless and morally wrong." He said that U.S. sanctions did not enjoy the support "of even one country in Asia" and implied that other Asians resented U.S. sanctions. Sanctions, he added, only served to further isolate the regime and build its staying power. He observed that although there was considerable inflation in Burma, "the economic situation is not as serious as it is in many countries, including even democratic ones."

15.(C) Kabanov also criticized the NLD, claiming that the party had never offered alternative proposals, lacked influence, and had failed at opportunities to build confidence with the regime. He did acknowledge, however,

that if another election were held, the NLD would win as it had in 1990. Meanwhile, he said, there have been "no big political changes--no progress and no deterioration" since he arrived four years ago. "Therefore," he queried, "why is the U.S. pursuing the so-called 'Myanmar Question' at the Security Council?"

¶16. (C) The Charge responded that in fact there was growing understanding in the region that the situation in Burma is not sustainable and poses a threat to the immediate region. "We may have different tactics," she said, "but we can all agree, even Russia, that the SPDC is dysfunctional." Kabanov dismissed as "too easy" to say Burma needed to reform. He said the hard part was defining how it should happen, and that should be left to the SPDC. The Charge also noted that the U.S. and many countries in the region had made progress in identifying common objectives, including urging the regime to release political prisoners and to allow an inclusive, meaningful dialogue.

¶17. (C) The Charge told Kabanov that the USG had no specific timetable for action on Burma at the UNSC, but would continue to pursue discussions with Security Council members. She added that Burma's export of disease, refugees, and drugs merited appropriate discussion at the UN. She emphasized that the United States did not have a blueprint for Burma, nor should Russia or any other country. "We don't have the answers," she said, "we only want to encourage representatives of all the Burmese people to sit down and

RANGOON 00000602 004.2 OF 004

talk to find a way forward." She added that the current regime has no popular support and as long as the generals refuse to listen to representatives of the people, there will be no stability.

COMMENT: A HARD NUT TO CRACK

¶18. (C) Ambassador Kabanov is one of the more interesting members of the diplomatic corps. He is well informed and likes to engage in spirited discussions, unlike most of his Ambassadorial colleagues. He does not, however, make an effort to speak with ordinary Burmese or to travel around the country. As a consequence, he is ill-informed on many local realities. He clearly underestimates, for example, the popularity of the democratic opposition and broad dissatisfaction with military rule.

¶19. (C) Kabanov also views Burma from a different perspective. When Charge mentioned the dramatic changes in Russia since 1988 in comparison to Burma, Kabanov made it clear that he viewed Russia's transformation as a disaster, especially the breakup of the Soviet Union. He clearly empathizes with the SPDC's defense of military rule as "necessary to avoid the disintegration of the Union." This makes him, and perhaps by extension Russia's Burma policy, a hard nut to crack. Kabanov probably cares far more about Burma policy than anyone in Moscow. We have seen progress in recent months in moving many countries away from the sanctions debate and toward agreement on common objectives, but we still have our work cut out in bringing Russia along. End Comment.

VILLAROSA